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ABSTRACT

This Digest reviews the historical background on grade retention and promotion and examines research, criteria, and policies concerning these options. The historical overview points out changes in attitudes toward mastery-based promotion and social promotion practices in the schools. Valid and invalid approaches to research on grade retention are pointed out and efforts to develop models of criteria pertinent to retention decisions are reported. Schools having different promotion policies are briefly mentioned and, in conclusion, guidelines for developing a promotion policy are offered. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

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Grade Retention and Promotion

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Many educators advocate that public schools should stress mastery of basic skills and adopt clear measures of scholastic competence. In many school districts, children now must pass minimum competency tests in order to progress from one grade to the next, and children who fail are likely to be retained. This Digest reviews the historical background on grade retention and promotion and examines research, criteria, and policies concerning these options.

Historical Overview

When graded schools began to replace the one-room schoolhouse in the mid-19th century, students were promoted on "merit," the mastery of an inflexible academic standard for each grade level. Approximately every other child was retained at some time during his/her first 8 years of school (Rose and others 1983).

Around the 1930s, however, changing attitudes toward the role of schooling and the psychology of the individual student prompted a shift toward an approach called "social promotion," in which children passed to the next grade with their age peers, receiving remedial academic help when necessary. Among the reasons for this policy change was the concern of social scientists that retention might be damaging to children's social and emotional development.

During the last few decades, opponents of social promotion have argued that the absence of a fixed academic standard symbolizes a disregard for achievement—and that this disregard undermines children's motivation to learn. Consequently, schools have tended to return to promotion based on mastery of grade-level objectives.

As a result, the number of children retained in grade has increased. For example, after adopting a pupil-progression plan based on academic mastery, four times as many Atlanta first graders were retained than previously (Rose and others 1983). Pinellas County, Florida doubled or tripled its normal retention rate after implementing a competency-based promotion policy (Eligett and Tocco 1983).

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Grade Retention Research and Methodology

Research on grade retention, focusing on the effects on children's academic perfomance and on social and personal adjustment, has been inconclusive. Moreover, methodological problems inherent in the bulk of grade retention studies may invalidate even those findings (Jackson 1975; Chafe 1984; Labaree 1983a, 1983b).

Two of the three types of research designs are biased either for or against grade retention. The first design, comparing outcomes for retained and promoted students, favors promotion because it compares students having academic difficulties with students having fewer problems (as evidenced by their promotion).

The second design, comparing retained students before and after their promotion, is biased in favor of grade retention because it fails to control for possible improvement resulting from maturational or environmental causes other than the retention experience itself.

While most studies involve one of these two designs, a third type compares randomly promoted or retained students, all of whom are experiencing difficulties. Although this design is the only one that can ensure valid results, it is used rarely, perhaps because school administrators and educators are unwilling to assign children to a "second-best" learning situation.

Retention Criteria

First graders are retained more often than children in other grades (Rose and others 1983). From first through sixth grade, retention rates decline. They increase again in the seventh grade and at the high school level.

Such observational data may be helpful in predicting educational trends, but research has little to say about which children are most likely to benefit from retention or whether retention is beneficial at all. The decision to retain a child is based on teacher ratings of social maturity and student performance on objective achievement tests. However, other factors, such as socioeconomic level, classroom behavior, and the

teacher's educational philosophy, may influence the retention decision (Plummer and others 1984).

To standardize retention criteria, Light (1977) has developed a scale including 19 categories of data pertinent to the retention decision. Lieberman (1980) has generated a similar model which includes child, family, and school factors. Other observers suggest that important contextual variables for retention may include personal and home factors (such as the child's chronological age, social-emotional and physical maturity, and parental attitudes). School-related factors, such as achievement norms, the approach to instruction, and the number of previous retentions, may also affect outcomes for the child.

Policy Decisions

Although evidence fails to support the connection between merit promotion and student achievement or motivation, there is no proof that such policies are not related to achievement—and many schools have instituted promotion standards based on mastery of specific grade-level objectives.

In a survey of five school systems that recently established programs with raised promotional standards, Labaree (1983a, 1983b) found a variety of approaches. The most inflexible program, implemented by New York City, requires that fourth and seventh graders score above a fixed point in the reading portion of the California Achievement Test for promotion. No other factors are considered.

On the other hand, Milwaukee's promotion policy suggests that retention be considered, not mandated, for first through third graders who are unable to read at a set primer level. For fourth through sixth graders, math and language arts abilities are added to reading ability as possible determining factors. This program considers a range of variables for retention.

Suggestions for Program Implementation

Without conclusive research evidence, promotion policies are likely to be based on social values and philosophical orientations. Labaree (1983b) suggests the following for decision makers formulating such policies:

- Base eligibility for promotion on multiple measures rather than a single test.
- Construct measures of achievement that reflect the special character of the learning process within a given curriculum. (In other words, the best measures are not always the ones offering the greatest uniformity.)
- Formulate in advance the criteria for success and a rigorous method of evaluation. Contingency plans should be made in case the program does not achieve stated aims.
- Avoid the tendency to teach only "the basics" or toward a given competency test. The curriculum should remain varied and challenging.
- Include the average child while attempting to raise the level of the low-achiever. Higher promotional standards should be part of a larger effort to encourage high achievement for all students.
- Stress the quality of instruction for retained pupils. Retention should not become an end in itself.

What matters most is not the specifics of any given promotional policy, but the overall effectiveness of schools. Policy makers should view retention and promotion procedures in the larger context of the learning climate and weigh such factors as inservice training, administrative leadership, curriculum objectives, and quality of instruction in any decisions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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